

Intervention in Syria: Assessing the Options

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt), [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Dec 13, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

Without external intercession, the violence in Syria is likely to escalate, with destabilizing consequences for its neighbors, particularly Lebanon and Iraq.

The intensifying internal crisis in Syria has prompted calls for humanitarian and military intervention, including options such as a border enclave or buffer zone, "humanitarian corridors" to provide food and medical assistance to interior areas, and a no-fly zone over large parts of the country. All of these options entail certain operational challenges and a degree of risk, but intervention also presents policy opportunities.

Humanitarian Enclave or Buffer Zone

Turkey has floated the possibility of an enclave or buffer area in Syrian territory where internally displaced persons could find safe haven. This would resemble the enclave created by U.S. and coalition troops in northern Iraq in 1991 during Operation Provide Comfort, to protect Iraqi Kurds who fled there after the failed uprising against Saddam Hussein.

Operational requirements. This option would necessitate the use of ground forces to carve out and secure an enclave, probably in the face of resistance by infiltrators and provocateurs sent by Damascus, if not elements of the Syrian armed forces. Air cover would be needed to provide reconnaissance, overwatch, and potential defense against ground and air attack.

Such an operation would require significant military resources, and it is not clear whether Turkey would be willing

or able to carry out the mission on its own. Provide Comfort required 20,000 U.S. and coalition troops to secure a safe haven for 500,000-700,000 Kurds. Thirty donor nations and nearly fifty international and nongovernmental organizations provided humanitarian assistance. At the very least, Turkey might call on the international community to provide food, medicine, and temporary shelters for displaced persons.

Risks and challenges. The greatest risk is that of a clash with regime forces intent on preserving Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity. And while an enclave could serve as a safe haven for several hundred thousand displaced Syrians, millions of others would remain vulnerable. Moreover, it is unclear how many Syrians could realistically reach the enclaves, particularly if the regime tried to obstruct access. The army is deployed throughout the country and could easily impede movement toward the Turkish border, as it has already done to some extent. Finally, a large enclave could quickly exhaust local resources; large quantities of humanitarian assistance would probably be needed from elsewhere.

Humanitarian Corridor

France has raised the possibility of creating ground corridors to deliver food and medicine to beleaguered civilians in Syria's interior. Such an option could be carried out with or without the regime's assent, using aid workers in the former case or armed "observers" in the latter. For instance, overland routes from Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan could service distressed populations in hotspots such as Idlib, Homs, Hama, and Deraa. Air corridors could conceivably reach less accessible areas. At present, however, it is not clear that corridors of either kind are needed.

Operational requirements. This option would necessitate a major logistical effort. Suitable ports or airfields would have to be secured near each corridor, and large numbers of vehicles and aircraft would be needed to move supplies into Syria. Security would be required for logistical hubs and overland routes to ensure that aid reaches the intended population. And some means of command and control would be needed to organize, coordinate, and secure corridors and relief convoys.

Risks and challenges. Maintaining aid corridors would pose significant challenges under anything but permissive conditions. If the regime were to overtly or covertly oppose the effort, the difficulties could be substantial. Damascus might disrupt relief operations by passive means, such as obstructing roads with livestock or organizing demonstrations by regime supporters. Or it could take aggressive steps such as employing mines or improvised explosive devices, or even regular forces, to block aid convoys. All of these actions would raise the risks for those participating in corridor operations, and the humanitarian mission could quickly become a military campaign. Many countries would likely cease participating in a humanitarian operation that took a violent turn, particularly since such a development would require more than the armed "observers" envisioned by France.

No-Fly Zone

The Syrian opposition has called for a no-fly zone to protect the people from regime predations -- perhaps in the hope that such a zone would eventually be expanded to include attacks against regime ground forces, as occurred in Libya. Yet Damascus has not made extensive use of rotary or fixed-wing aircraft against the opposition. Thus, a no-fly zone would make little sense, unless the intention were to bolster opposition morale or lay the groundwork for more expansive military operations later.

Operational requirements. A no-fly zone would necessitate the use of operating bases in neighboring states such as Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey. Yet Ankara, for one, would oppose military intervention except to prevent an imminent massacre, and would prefer that any intervention be carried out by the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, or the United States -- but not NATO. In any case, bases in neighboring countries could be supplemented by aircraft carriers in the Eastern Mediterranean, and perhaps NATO bases in Italy if the alliance were to participate. The operation would also require aerial tankers to ensure continuous coverage. And if Damascus were to challenge

the zone, large numbers of aircraft configured for air-to-air combat and air-defense suppression would be required, pointing to a U.S., European, or NATO role.

Risks and challenges. Syria has one of the densest air-defense arsenals in the world, though most of its components date from the Cold War era. Given that it has not relied heavily on airpower to counter the opposition, Damascus might simply opt not to contest a no-fly zone, as it would have little tangible effect on regime operations (though it might boost opposition morale and spur defections from regime forces). Yet if Damascus feared that a zone presaged operations against its ground forces and decided to contest it, intervening forces would need to suppress Syrian air defenses and neutralize the air force. Accordingly, this option would probably require the involvement of high-end forces to ensure its success.

Iran's Response

According to an October 4 report by Iran's Fars News Agency, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad warned Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu that Syria would respond to foreign intervention with attacks on Israeli, U.S., and European interests, presumably using terrorist proxies, rockets, and missiles. This possibility should, of course, be factored into any intervention decision. Assad also reportedly warned that Iran's navy would attack U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf, raising questions as to whether Tehran would actually go to war for its Syrian ally.

Iran has always avoided direct, armed interventions that risked a broader war, generally preferring to respond through proxies or other indirect means. For example, Iran would likely assist Syrian efforts to counter a no-fly zone by providing advice and advanced air-defense systems, and perhaps encouraging Hizballah to lash out at U.S. or Israeli interests. Yet Tehran has also been hedging its bets by establishing contacts with the Syrian opposition, which may indicate that it is preparing for the post-Assad era. This implies that Iran itself would probably not forcibly oppose foreign intervention in Syria -- although Tehran's recent pledge to respond in kind to U.S. pressure on the nuclear issue may alter this calculus.

Other Options

The Assad regime has demonstrated that it is willing to do whatever is necessary to stay in power. Therefore, more aggressive options may be required if the international community hopes to safeguard the Syrian people, including covert military assistance to the opposition, a combined no-fly/no-drive zone, or attacks on regime forces involved in violent repression. These options would generally entail higher levels of risk, but they also offer greater prospects for success.

Covert action would take time to work, but it might hearten the opposition, catalyze defections among government forces, and increase tensions within the regime. And as indicated above, a no-fly zone would make sense only if it were the opening phase of a more expansive intervention, as occurred in Libya. In any case, the international community should neither underestimate nor exaggerate Syria's military capacity, especially its air defenses. Although such defenses would not pose an insurmountable obstacle to a modern air force, suppressing them would entail risks, including potential losses among intervening forces.

More broadly, the no-fly/no-drive and direct-attack options raise the risk of a regional conflict, although the potential players in such a scenario do not seem willing to take that route at the moment. Syria would likely view such operations as a prelude to regime change and might respond with rocket/missile strikes and attempted terrorist attacks against Israel and countries participating in the campaign. But it seems unlikely that Syria's allies would risk being drawn into a conflict to save a failing ally. Hizballah has to worry about how a war would affect its domestic support base. Hamas is already relocating its operations from Syria, clearly signaling that it is not going down with the Assad ship. And Iran would likely eschew direct intervention, husbanding its forces for a possible confrontation with the United States over its nuclear program.

Conclusion

Intervention in Syria would be a demanding mission carrying significant risks. Participating states should be prepared for the possibility that Damascus might try to thwart intervention and escalate any ensuing confrontation. And failed humanitarian efforts would produce pressures to "double down" and expand the mission's military dimension. Intervening forces could even be caught up in a burgeoning civil war.

Yet these risks suggest that intervention should be carefully considered, not avoided altogether. Without external intercession, the violence in Syria is likely to escalate, with destabilizing consequences for its neighbors, particularly Lebanon and Iraq. Assad's forces will continue killing until the opposition is defeated or the regime itself breaks. Accordingly, even covert intervention would buoy the opposition's morale, while signaling to Damascus that events are moving against it, that external powers are willing to run risks to aid the population, and that the opposition has important allies. Taken together, these developments could significantly alter the dynamic of the Syrian struggle.

Lt. Col. Steven Beasley (U.S. Air Force) is a visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute. Michael Eisenstadt is director of the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at the Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant, Iraq, and Iran. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)